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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: JVP JINGOISM ELICITS CLARIFICATION ON
NEGOTIATIONS; PROVOKES PROTESTS IN TRINCOMALEE

REF: COLOMBO 426

1. (U) Coalition partner Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) opposition to an official statement issued by the Government (GSL) on February 22 declaring its readiness to discuss "an interim arrangement" with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) prompted an official clarification of the GSL stance from the Government Information Department. The JVP had branded the GSL position as anti-nationalist and threatened to resign from the coalition unless it were withdrawn (Reftel). The clarification, issued on March 3, stresses that the GSL never agreed--as the JVP charged--to accepting the LTTE's controversial Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal as the sole basis of negotiations. Instead, "the Government has agreed to the concept of setting up an Interim Authority within the context of negotiating a permanent settlement to the ethnic conflict . . . (which) is very different from opening negotiation solely on the basis of the LTTE demand of the Interim Self-Governing Authority, which prevents the re-opening of direct negotiations." The March 3 statement then quotes extracts from previous GSL statements, including one made by President Kumaratunga in October, to demonstrate the GSL position has not changed.

2. (U) The same day trouble broke out in the eastern coastal town of Trincomalee when JVP MP Jayantha Wijesekera, along with volunteers from the party's local "Red Star Disaster Assistance Program," attempted to build houses for tsunami victims on property owned by the Trincomalee Urban Council. According to one local resident, a group of Tamils, backed (or incited) by the LTTE, protested the move, complaining that the houses were being built only for Sinhalese victims and noting that the land was public property. The confrontation turned violent, as rocks were thrown, road barriers thrown up and a JVP van set on fire. Two people were injured. The Sri Lanka Army and police were mobilized to regain order, and local residents, under the mistaken belief that a curfew had been imposed, returned home. According to local residents, the Sri Lanka Army Spokesman and DIG of Police Neville Wijesinghe, all was quiet by about 5:00 p.m. local time.

3. (SBU) JVP MP Wijesekera, who has earned a justifiable reputation as a firebrand and rabble-rouser, blamed the incident on the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA)--especially Trinco MP and local rival R. Sampanthan--when we talked to him on March 4. Wijesekera claimed that he had obtained prior approval from local authorities and, while acknowledging that most of his program's beneficiaries are indeed members of the majority Sinhalese, alleged that representatives from all three communities were included in the project. Sampanthan, on the other hand, denied any personal involvement to us, asserting instead that the protests were utterly spontaneous.

4. (SBU) Comment: The JVP continues to play an extraordinarily unhelpful role in just about every sphere of GSL activity, whether it be the budget, agricultural policy, the peace process or tsunami reconstruction. (In another example, on March 2 the JVP organized the first-ever "Anti-colonialism Day"--a move, in the view of many observers, intended to embarrass the government as it welcomes aid organizations from many former colonial powers to help rebuild.) The President apparently took her coalition partner's latest threat to leave the government seriously enough to issue a clarification--a clarification that, unfortunately, reinserts certain conditions on resumed negotiations omitted in the February 22 statement. We predict this apparent concession will be unlikely to satisfy the ever-contentious JVP for long, however. With nearly equal percentages of Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil residents, Trincomalee is a particularly volatile area, and Wijesekera's provocative activism is a constant irritant. We have no indication that he plans to adopt a lower profile anytime soon. The GSL may have weathered this latest fracas, but we expect more trouble from its fractious partner soon.

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